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Published in:

The journal of aesthetics and art criticism

Publication date:

2020

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wildman, N., & Folde, C. (2020). Defending explosive universal fictions. *The journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, 78(2), 238-242.

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Defending explosive universal fictions

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[This is a final draft; please quote/cite the published version]

In a recent paper (2017), we offer a recipe for producing universal fictions, i.e. fictions within which every proposition is true. First, produce a fiction f whose (primary or secondary) content includes (i) a contradiction, and (ii) the principle of explosion.¹ Second, ensure that a localized conditional closure principle is true of f :

FMP-LOCAL _{f} For the particular fiction f , if $P \rightarrow Q$ and P are both true-in- f , then Q is also true-in- f (2017: 78)²

This principle is localized to f , saying nothing about whether other fictions are similarly “closed”. This contrasts with the generalized conditional closure principle:

FMP For every fiction f , if $P \rightarrow Q$ and P are both true-in- f , then Q is also true-in- f (2017: 77)

We think FMP is false, as not every fiction is closed under conditional elimination.

If you achieve both steps, then, because (ii) is a conditional and (i) is its antecedent, f 's closure under FMP-LOCAL _{f} ensures that the consequent is also true-in- f . And since the consequent is that *every* proposition is true, it follows that f is a universal fiction.

Ricksand (2020) raises three objections to our proposal. Here, we take the opportunity to reply to these concerns, thereby clarifying and expanding on our argument.

Before turning to Ricksand's objections, it is useful to discuss the background dialectic. Doing so will clarify our ecumenical approach and serve as a foundation for our replies.

I. The background story

There are (at least!) two substantive difficulties one faces when following our recipe. The first concerns ensuring that (i) and (ii) are part of f 's content. Addressing this requires saying something about the broader question of how to make a particular proposition true in a given fiction.

This is a hoary, difficult matter, to which there is no straightforward answer. One naïve idea is that *saying makes it so*; roughly, if some statement is explicitly made in a fiction (e.g. by the fiction's narrator), then the expressed proposition is true in that fiction. Philosophers and literary theorists have roundly (and rightly) rejected this stipulatory account, as e.g. any fiction featuring an unreliable narrator is a counter-example. A second, related notion is *intentionalism*: if the (or an) author of fiction f intends that p is true-in- f , then p is true-in- f . This approach has also been largely rejected, running into numerous apparent counter-examples (see e.g. Lewis 1978, though c.f. Stock 2017).

Another way of being part of f 's content is to be *imported*, i.e., a proposition brought into the fiction from the outside. However, what (if any) propositions should be imported is another controversial matter.³ Yet another way is to be *implied*; i.e., if p is a logical consequence of some proposition that is true-in- f , then p is true-in- f . This is especially unhelpful, since not only does it move the bubble in the carpet (since it requires that we already know some of f 's content), but it is not clear which notion of logical consequence we should employ.

We mention these to highlight that there is no good *general* story about how to guarantee that a proposition is true in particular fiction. This makes addressing the first issue extremely difficult, as it is hard to know whether one has succeeded in making (i) and (ii) true in f .⁴

The second difficulty concerns ensuring that f is governed by FMP-LOCAL_f. As before, there is a lurking larger problem: namely, settling what (if any) principles constitute the logic of fictional truth. At least at first glance, not all fictions' content obeys the same logical principles. For example, Priest's *Sylvan's Box* and Bradbury's *A Sound of Thunder* are inconsistent, yet their content isn't governed by the principle of explosion (otherwise, they would be universal too). Similarly, essentially incomplete fictions like *Blade Runner* seem to violate the principle that, if P or Q is true-in- f , then P is true-in- f or Q is true-in- f .⁵ These issues have led some – e.g. Routley (1979: 10) – to hold that there is no uniform logic of fictional truth.⁶ If Routley is correct, then proving that f 's content obeys FMP-LOCAL_f becomes that much harder (and shows that we need to appeal to local, rather than global principles).

In light of these substantive disagreements, in our argument for universal fictions, we wanted to avoid committing to any specific view concerning fictional truth and make as few controversial assumptions as possible. So, to ensure that (i) and (ii) are part of f 's content, we suggested including explicit statements in f that expressed the relevant propositions. For while think that saying does not *always* make it so, it *generally* does. That is, if fiction f includes an explicit statement that expresses a proposition p , then, *ceteris paribus*, p is true-in- f . Consequently, including these explicit statements is a fairly uncontroversial way of getting (i) and (ii) to be part of f 's content.⁷ To stress, we don't think this is the *only* way of doing this, just one of the least controversial ways.

Our strategy concerning the second issue was also ecumenical. Specifically, we suggested including an 'innocuous' conditional and antecedent as part of f 's content. Together, these strongly suggest (though do not strictly entail) that the relevant consequent is also true-in- f . In turn, this means that f 's content is closed under FMP-LOCAL_f. And denying this closure would require denying the (extremely plausible) fictional truth of the consequent, which is 'utterly implausible' (2017: 78). For example, in our example fiction *Monsieur Impossible*, we included that (iii) if Monsieur Impossible is a member of the King's Musketeers, then he works for the King, and that (iv) Monsieur Impossible is a member of the Musketeers; the intuitive result is that (v) Monsieur Impossible works for the King is also fictionally true. This strongly suggests that *Monsieur Impossible* is closed under FMP-LOCAL_{MI}, as denying this would seem to require denying the (extremely plausible) fictional truth of (v). As before, we don't think this is the *only* way to guarantee that FMP-LOCAL_f is true of f , but is, we believe, a fairly uncontroversial method, compatible with a wide variety of views about the logic of fictional truth.

We would be the first to admit that neither of these solutions are indisputable (what philosophical arguments are?). Nor are these strategies the only way to resolve these two issues. But they are likely the best one can do without providing deep and controversial answers to the two lurking general questions just outlined. If one has a completely worked out story about the necessary and sufficient conditions for fictional truth as well as an account of the logic of fictional truth, then you could probably do better. Yet that wasn't our goal. We wanted to sketch a recipe for generating universal fictions that was as theory neutral as possible.

With this background discussion out of the way, let's now turn to Ricksand's objections.

§2. Replies to Ricksand

As we understand it, Ricksand effectively has three objections. The first concerns our argument for closure under FMP-LOCAL_f. One might worry that, since the innocuous case features a *consistent* antecedent, it only shows that f is governed by

FMP-LOCAL-CON_f

For the particular fiction f , if $P \rightarrow Q$ and P are both true-in- f and P is consistent, then Q is also true-in- f (2017: 78)

In reply, we offered cases where the “innocuous” conditional and antecedent are inconsistent, though the consequent is suitably mundane. For example, our *Clara’s Crazy Caper* (2017: 78) included the conditional (vi) if exactly three and not exactly three carrots are consumed, then some carrots have been consumed, as well as the contradiction (vii) exactly three and not exactly three carrots are consumed. As before, it is strongly intuitive that, given this set-up, this makes (viii) some carrots have been consumed is true-in-CCC. Thus the same argument applies: either the objector grants that the consequence is part of the fiction’s content, in which case they must accept that the content is governed by the unrestricted FMP-LOCAL_{CCC}, or they have to take on the ‘utterly implausible’ consequence that (viii) is not true-in-CCC. At minimum, this places the burden of proof on the objector.

Here, Ricksand objects that, ‘it is not clear why this example... would pose a problem to an objector’. If the objection ‘consists of categorically denying that instances of FMP-LOCAL can be fictionally true when [the antecedent] is inconsistent, it hardly amounts to a counterargument to provide another example ... where [the antecedent] is inconsistent, since this is the very kind of case the objector will not accept’ (2020: 3).

In reply, first note that the issue isn’t whether an instance of FMP-LOCAL is fictionally true; what matters is whether it is true *of*, not *in* the relevant fiction. Rather, Ricksand’s objector must ‘categorically deny’ that *any* instance of the fictional truth of both a conditional and the relevant inconsistent antecedent entails the fictional truth of the consequent. This categorical denial looks extremely difficult to maintain. For example, suppose that (ix) $((P \& \neg P) \rightarrow ((P \& \neg P) \& Q))$, (x) $(P \& \neg P)$, and (xi) Q are all true-in- f . Denying that (xi) is true-in- f because (ix)/(x) feature a contradiction looks ridiculous. Yet this is what Ricksand’s objector is committed to. At minimum, this objector bears the burden of proof of explaining why we should accept this strongly counter-intuitive result. And, until this is forthcoming, we’ve enough to warrant thinking that f is closed under FMP-LOCAL _{f} .

Ricksand’s second objection is about our discussion of an alternative universal fiction recipe.⁸ Per this alternative, one can produce a universal fiction f^* by telling a story that explicitly includes some like, ‘everything is true’.⁹ This is meant to entail that every proposition is true-in- f^* .

We have significant worries about this alternative recipe (2017: 74-5). We illustrated our worries via an analogy: that ‘everyone is treacherous’ is true-in-*Threepenny-Opera* does not entail that e.g. ‘Obama is treacherous’ is true-in-*Threepenny*. This is because, plausibly, the ‘everyone’ quantifier only ranges over characters in the story, and not every individual is part of *Threepenny*’s cast. Similarly, it is plausible that ‘everything is true’ being true-in- f^* does not entail that absolutely every proposition is true-in- f^* . This is because, plausibly, the ‘everything’ quantifier only ranges over those propositions that are in fact true-in- f^* , and not every proposition is part of f^* ’s content. So, we think it best to ‘sidestep [this] route and offer a different pathway to universal fictions’ (2017: 75).

Ricksand’s second objection is that our worries about the alternative recipe apply equally to our own. In brief, why think that the quantifier in the principle of explosion has a universal range, while the ‘everything’ in these other stories is restricted?

As well as apparently undermining our recipe, Ricksand suggests this demonstrates the ‘triviality’ of FMP. This is because we ‘concede that [FMP does] not obtain with necessity in all fictions, and that it is only a local version of FMP which allows for the construction of a universal fiction, since the principles necessary for rendering a fiction universal must be presented explicitly in order to obtain. However, by conceding that no version of FMP obtains without explicit statements to that effect they also inadvertently undermine their own criticism...’ (2020: 4).

First, the issue is to have FMP-LOCAL be true *of*, not true *in* the relevant fiction – we want the content to be closed under the principle, not for the principle to be part of the content. Second,

it is hard to see how FMP is ‘trivial’ if it is true of some but not all fictions. Third, we do *not* concede that no version of FMP obtains without some explicit statement that it does so. Our argument for FMP-LOCAL_{*f*} involves no such a statement, and, frankly, we wouldn’t even know what sort of explicit claim one could make that would be of any use. ‘FMP-LOCAL_{*f*} governs *f*’s content’ being part of *f*’s primary, explicit content certainly entails that ‘FMP-LOCAL_{*f*} governs *f*’s content’ is true-in-*f*. But it does *not* entail that FMP-LOCAL_{*f*} in fact governs *f*’s content, which is what matters here.¹⁰

Setting these aside, one reason for thinking the ‘Everything is true’ quantifier is restricted while our explosion quantifier is unrestricted is that there is no way to secure the relevant range for the former without appealing to something like authorial stipulation, a point that one advocate of this recipe readily admits (Deutsch 1985: 209fn16). In contrast, the *presumption* is that the explosive quantifier is absolutely unrestricted, because, when discussing explosion, logicians nearly universally accept that it is so.¹¹ So, we don’t need to *do* anything to make it unrestricted – it comes ready-made that way – but the alternative recipe must rely upon stipulation. And given the substantive debate about the limitations of authorial stipulation, we think this is problematic. This isn’t to say that this other method *must* fail – indeed, we never said anything like that! Rather, we think it better to avoid getting tangled in these ‘thorny issues’ about authorial intent (2017: 75) in favour of our approach.

A second difference is that one can think of the principle of explosions as a derivation or inference rule (e.g., that, from a true contradiction, one can derive/infer any proposition). This ‘generative’ understanding fits with our recipe for generating universal fictions: assuming that the relevant fiction’s content includes a contradiction and the principle of explosion, one can then use this combination to derive/infer every proposition within the fiction.¹² Further, it does not seem subject to the restricted quantification range worry. However, there is no way to understand the ‘Everything is true’ claim non-quantificationally. Thus any recipe that relies upon it is subject to the worry. Since our approach potentially avoids it, this looks like another point in its favour.

These indicate that there is a substantive difference between our recipe and the ‘everything is true’ alternative, and suffices to undercut Ricksand’s second objection.

Ricksand’s third objection is related to the previous. He offers his own purportedly universal fiction, *Universalia*, which he claims leads to a dilemma: either we must ‘concede that the statement in fiction *f* that *q* is fictionally true is sufficient to render *q* fictional in *f*’, or we must ‘deny that such a statement is sufficient to render *q* fictional in *f*’ (2020: 5). But, if we accept the first horn, then our recipe is ‘redundant and needlessly complicated’ because one can create a universal fiction – i.e., *Universalia* – which does not include ‘any of the factors that make [our] fictions universal (FMP-LOCAL, the principle of explosion, and a contradiction)’ (2020: 5). Meanwhile, if we accept the second horn, then we

would also have to deny that FMP-LOCAL necessarily obtains and, along with that, the very possibility of universal fictions. Since this denial entails that some propositions cannot be fictionally true only by virtue of being stated explicitly, [we] would have to show why the propositions making their fictions universal belong to the set of propositions which can be made fictional or, conversely, why these propositions do not belong to the set of propositions which cannot be made fictional. (2020: 5)

First, a point of clarification: no one should accept that including in fiction *f* a statement that *q* is fictionally true is enough to make *q* true-in-*f*. That ‘*q* is fictionally true’ is true-in-*f* means that, in *f*, *q* is true in some fiction, while *q*’s being true-in-*f* means that, in *f*, *q*, and the former does not entail the latter.¹³ Presumably, Ricksand meant that including in fiction *f* the statement that *q* is true is enough to make *q* true-in-*f*. So we direct our reply to this suitably modified version of the dilemma.

We are happy to reject the first horn. We do *not* think that explicitly stating that q (in the relevant text) is sufficient to make q true-in- f . (Though it is worth stressing again that our recipe requires that FMP-LOCAL _{f} be true *of* and not *in* fiction f).¹⁴

However, rejecting the idea that (explicitly) saying makes it so does *not*, *contra* Ricksand, entail that ‘some propositions cannot be fictionally true only by virtue of being explicitly stated’ (2020: 5). This denial means that *some* attempts to make *some* proposition(s) fictionally true by means of explicit statement fail. But it doesn’t mean that, for some particular proposition, *every* attempt to make it fictionally true via explicit inclusion must fail. Since we don’t have to accept the latter, we won’t, which is enough to undermine Ricksand’s second horn. So, Ricksand’s dilemma is no threat either.¹⁵

The general upshot is that Ricksand’s objections do not threaten our recipe for universal fictions. Regardless, thinking about them was helpful for clarifying a number of points. For this reason, we thank him for engaging with our work. Finally, to conclude, we would like to mirror our previous ending: even if we have not convinced everyone that universal fictions are possible, we think that highlighting what moves must be made to accept or reject this possibility is interesting in its own right.

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¹ For present purposes, we treat the principle of explosion as a conditional of the form, 'If a contradiction is true, then everything is true', though we will revisit this later.

² FMP is short of 'Fictional Modus Ponens'.

³ For more on fictional import, see e.g. D'Alessandro (2016), Friend's 'reality assumption' (2017), Lewis (1978), Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' (1980), and Woods' 'fill' condition and 'world-inheritance thesis' (1974: 63–5; 2018).

⁴ And these difficulties emerge before we even get to the fact that (i) is a contradiction, which some philosophers – e.g. Hanley (2004) and, arguably, Nolan (2007) – say can't be fictionalized at all. However, c.f. Lewis (1978), Fine (1982), Deutsch (1985), Currie (1990), Byrne (1993), Phillips (1999), Priest (1997), Matravers (2003), and Walton (1994).

⁵ For further discussion, see Wildman & Woodward (2018) and Williams and Woodward (2020).

⁶ Alternatively, if there is a uniform logic of fiction, then it is extremely plausible that every fiction's content would be closed under FMP (Wildman and Folde 2017: 77). This would make solving the second issue remarkably easy.

⁷ Similarly, we made it clear that those who think it is impossible for contradictions to be fictionally true would 'find little of interest' in our argument (2017: 74).

⁸ Notably, Ricksand's second and third objections are similar to ones raised by Estrada-Gonzalez (2018).

⁹ See Routley (1979: 8), Deutsch (1985: 209fn16), and Estrada-Gonzalez (2018).

¹⁰ Similarly, as the discussion in §1 makes clear, we don't think that the 'principles necessary for rendering a fiction universal must be presented explicitly in order to obtain'.

¹¹ We add the 'nearly' qualifier to make room for logicians (probably in Australasia) who think otherwise.

¹² One "easy" way to do so would be to derive a single, massive conjunction which has all the propositions as conjuncts.

¹³ In fictional operator terms: the former says, ' $\mathcal{F}_f(\text{for some fiction } x, \mathcal{F}_x(q))$ ', the latter ' $\mathcal{F}_f(q)$ '.

¹⁴ That said, *Universalialia* does seem to follow our recipe. It includes both a contradiction and the principle of explosion: we are told that it is true-in-*Universalialia* that (a) every proposition is true and (b) classical logic doesn't obtain. But if every proposition is true, then a proposition that expresses the principle of explosion is true-in-*Universalialia*. Similarly for a proposition that says classical logic holds, contradicting (b). So nothing Ricksand says here shows that it is possible to produce a fiction that doesn't fit our recipe.

¹⁵ Ricksand also accuses us (2020: 6) of pre-supposing the *principle of poetic license* for our argument. We do not. We suppose that certain propositions – e.g conditionals with contradictory antecedents and, more controversially, contradictions themselves – can be fictionalized, and that some fictions are closed under conditional elimination. But that is a far from assuming PPL. However, for more on PPL, see Xhignesse (2016), Wildman and Folde (2018) and Folde (ms).